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Records at risk

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RECORDS AT RISK

A Report on
Montana's
Historical
Records
and a Strategic
Plan for Their
Survival

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RECORDS AT RISK

A Report on Montana's Documentary Heritage and a Strategic Plan for the Survival of Its Historical Records

Prepared by the Montana Historical Records Advisory Board
Helena, Montana, 1998

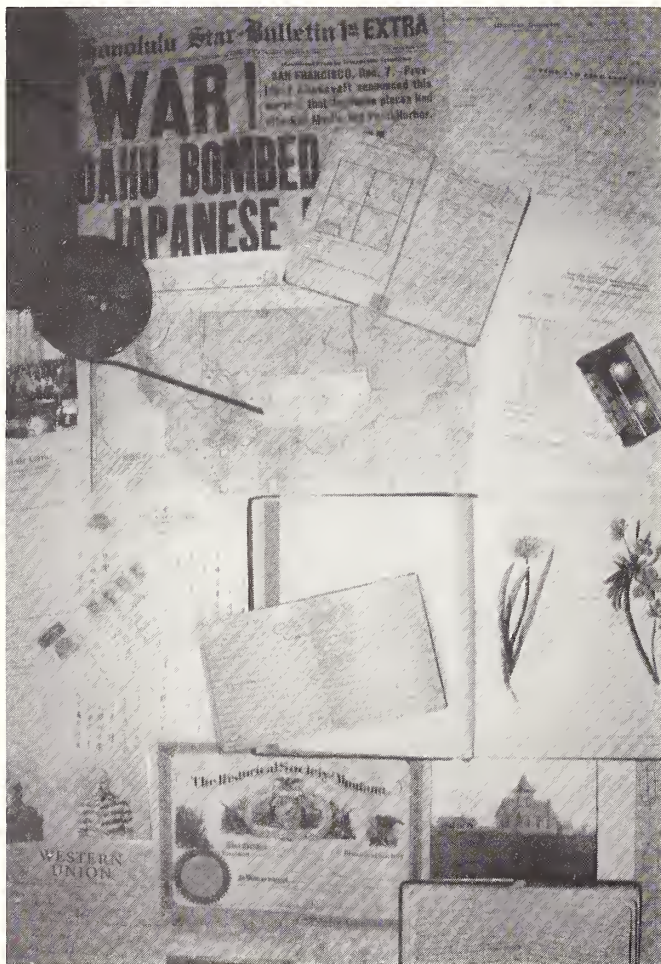
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Records At Risk

Will We Save Our Past?

Historical Records: What They Are

Montana's historical records—its documentary heritage—tells the story of Montana and the peoples of Montana. The Montana State Historical Records Advisory Board's vision is to raise the awareness of all Montanans to the value of their documentary heritage and to the need to protect this treasure, which, if lost, cannot be replaced.



*A collage of various types of historical records, including diaries, survey books, maps, photographs, audio recordings, letters and telegrams, and legislative minutes.
(Montana Historical Society Archives)*

The traditional definition of "archives" is complex. Archives are the non-current records of an organization preserved because of their continuing, or enduring, value. These permanent records have been evaluated and determined to have sufficient historical or other value to warrant continued preservation beyond the time they are needed for administrative, legal, or fiscal purposes. Archives also can refer to the agency or organization responsible for appraising, accessioning, preserving, and making available these permanent records. For example, the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives is the responsible agency for preserving the historical records of Butte and Silver Bow County. Finally, the term also can mean the buildings or portions thereof, where permanent records are located after being accessioned by an archival agency.

Professional archivists will sometimes make a further distinction between "archives" and "manuscripts." Strictly speaking, archives are the non-current but still useful records of an organization or institution *preserved by that organization or institution*. As organizational units, archives are part of the larger entity whose records they maintain, and their primary mission is to serve that institution. Thus the Montana State Archives, an agency of state government, preserves the official historical records of Montana state agencies and elected officials. In contrast, manuscripts collections are the records created or gathered by an organization or individual but transferred from the original custodian to a collecting repository, such as a local historical society or university library. Such repositories collect organizational records and personal papers from many different sources, primarily to serve researchers outside their own organization. For the purposes of this report, both archives and manuscripts are included in the term historical records.

Though often thought of as “old files,” archives are not in fact defined by any specific physical form. Historical records take many forms. Not all are made of paper nor are all composed of written words. Photographs, films, audio recordings, and computerized data, as well as paper documents, face continuing dangers. All are subject to natural deterioration over time. Audio and video recordings and computerized data can be read only with equipment that quickly becomes obsolete. In such cases, it is necessary to preserve not just the records but to continually convert the data to forms that can be read by the new equipment.

Equally important, archives and manuscripts are not simply *all* of the “old files” of an organization or individual. They are records saved because archivists have determined they have some probable future value. That process of evaluation is called appraisal. Historical records may have many different potential uses which justify their preservation after they are no longer needed in daily activity. They are most likely to be used for research by the general public and scholars, in administrative reference, during the establishment of legal rights and claims, and for fiscal accountability.

We all, to an extent, are archivists. Everyone accumulates records: tax documents, personal correspondence, banking records, family photographs, and the mail brings more each day. And we all appraise those records—decide what to keep and what to throw away. Often people don’t think their records are historical because they aren’t 100 years old, or 50 years old, or even 25 years old. But all records, if preserved for that long, will become historical records. Are they worth preserving?

Historical Records Are Important

Records are critical to every citizen. They protect our individual rights, they illuminate our past, and they are essential to the operation of our government, to businesses, to civic organizations, to churches, to individuals. Records are fundamental to the personal, social, and political relationships we form, relationships that are a part of our everyday lives. They define the responsibilities and commitments of these relationships.

Records such as birth, marriage, and death certificates, leases and other agreements, and wills and deeds to property provide evidence of our personal transactions with our government and other institutions. They protect our rights by ensuring our entitlement to established benefits. If records have deteriorated beyond use or have been lost altogether, we no longer have the evidence they provided. Our rights have not been protected if vital information has been computerized but is no longer readable. We cannot discover our heritage when we cannot find the historical records about our family or community. Similarly, we cannot hold government officials accountable if their decisions are not documented in the records selected for preservation.

Most people would agree that the Montana constitution deserves to be preserved for legal purposes and that the diary of a soldier who fought with Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn has historical value. But what about the business records of a general mercantile store or the medical files of Butte miners who

Why Save Historical Records?

The uses and benefits of historical records are countless:

- They tell us where we’ve been, offer insights into where we are now, and provide vision for our future.
- Our government is obliged to preserve them.
- Organizations need them to continue their vital functions.
- Each historical record is unique; irreplaceable.

Council of State Historical Records Coordinators, April 1993

We're All Stakeholders

Helping all Montanans realize the importance of the preservation of our documentary heritage is one of the Board's key goals. Professionals and public alike have a stake in the future of the state's documentary heritage.

Historical records stakeholders include:

- ⇒ the legal and medical communities;
- ⇒ scholars—both amateur and professional;
- ⇒ legislators, city commissioners, school board trustees, county administrators;
- ⇒ filmmakers, writers, and television production people;
- ⇒ genealogists;
- ⇒ environmentalists and engineers;
- ⇒ local and state government employees;
- ⇒ real estate professionals;
- ⇒ tourists;
- ⇒ YOU!

Montana's SHRAB: Who We Are

The Montana State Historical Records Advisory Board—SHRAB for short—is one of more than fifty similar boards active in all the states, territories, and the District of Columbia. The system of state historical records advisory boards was created in 1975 by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), the grant-awarding arm of the National Archives. The state boards are authorized under federal statutes (44 USC 2104) and in federal regulations (36 CFR Chapter 12). All states and territories are required to have active historical records boards in order to participate in the NHPRC grant programs.

contracted silicosis? Often historical records have significance quite apart from the original reason for which they were created and used. Records maintained over time provide information to settle legal disputes, expose illegal transactions, uncover environmental or health threats, or write history.

Who is responsible for seeing that Montana's records with enduring value are preserved?

The Montana SHRAB traces its own beginnings to a September 1976 Executive Order issued by Governor Tom Judge. The Governor of Montana continues to appoint the eight members of the Montana Board to two-year terms. By federal regulation, board members must have experience or interest in the collection, administration, and use of historical records and are dedicated to the preservation and use of Montana's documentary heritage. Since Montana has so few working archivists, members of related fields, representing a variety of constituencies—such as records managers, genealogists, historians, collections curators, and members of local historical societies—have been included on the board over the years. The state archivist is a permanent member and serves as the state coordinator for the board and the Montana Historical Society provides staff support.

Montana's SHRAB, 1996-1998

- **Tim Bernardis**, *Little Big Horn College*
- **Peggy J. Bourne**, *City of Great Falls*
- **Robert Clark**, *Montana Historical Society*
- **Brian Cockhill**, *Montana Historical Society*
- **Ellen Crain**, *Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives*
- **Connie Erickson**, *Legislative Services Division*
- **Kathryn Otto**, *Montana Historical Society*
- **Marie Torosian**, *Salish Culture Committee*

Montana's SHRAB: What We Do

The Montana SHRAB serves two primary roles. First, the board reviews grant proposals of a statewide or local scope submitted to NHPRC for funding support. Second, the board serves as a central advisory body within Montana for historical records planning and coordination. NHPRC mandates strategic planning as a primary function of this advisory capacity.

In addition to the board's review and approval of grant proposals over the years, the Montana SHRAB has engaged in significant activities both on its own and in conjunction with other organizations. Most notable in recent years has been a series of workshops. In January 1995, the board sponsored a "Seminar on Public Records," which featured Utah State Archivist Jeffery O. Johnson. Legislators, elected state officials, local and state government employees, the media, and the general public were invited to attend the seminar. Johnson outlined Utah's Government Records Access and Management Act (GRAMA), which addresses access to records, classification, and privacy issues. Attendees found the seminar useful and agreed there needed to be more records-related workshops. Since then, the SHRAB has embarked on an annual workshop schedule, offering a new workshop at least once every year at the Montana History Conference, and often offering the same workshop a second time at the meeting of an allied organization, such as the Museums Association of Montana.

The Montana SHRAB adopted the following mission statement in 1997:

The Montana State Historical Records Advisory Board is dedicated to the preservation of Montana's records of enduring value, to sustaining records planning, and to promoting co-operative efforts among the state's records keepers.



*L.A. Huffman photograph of covered wagons on west Main Street in Miles City, 1882.
(Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives)*

Reassessing Montana's Documentary Heritage

In 1978, the Montana State Historical Records Advisory Board submitted to NHPRC "A Statement of Priorities and Preferred Approaches for the Historical Records Program in the State of Montana," which included Montana's five funding priorities for NHPRC grant funds. In 1982, the SHRAB conducted a needs assessment project and published the *Montana Historical Records Assessment Project* report, which included both short-term and long-range agendas. Neither the 1978 funding priorities nor the 1982 needs assessment has been revised until now.

In 1995 the State Historical Records Advisory Board began the strategic planning process, which met a priority established by NHPRC in its long-range plan, *To Protect a Priceless Legacy*. Working through the assistance of a NHPRC grant, the board began brainstorming attainable goals while remaining focused on the need for preserving Montana's legacies. As part of the planning process, the board held several working sessions and invited any interested participants to attend its annual fall meetings. In addition, for the first time since they were initially adopted, the board reviewed its funding priorities for NHPRC grants and issued preliminary revised priorities.

A two-day workshop, "Planning to Plan," was held February 5-6, 1996, in Helena. Tom Wilsted, who had recently participated in the Wyoming SHRAB's planning process, facilitated the meeting. The board invited others interested in historical records to attend and participate. Wilsted led the workshop participants through typical strategic planning sessions. The group brainstormed core beliefs and values about why records are important; discussed the records environment: strengths and weaknesses, stakeholders, and opportunities and challenges; and discussed historical records stakeholders as potential allies and how to build coalitions. By the end of the second day the group had developed a vision statement, written a mission statement, and identified key records issues.

The board conducted two surveys as part of its planning efforts. The first was a small survey of educational and training needs, sent to persons known to be involved in or interested in archives. The second, a much larger sampling, was part of a national survey conducted by the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators. This survey was sent to all local historical societies and local museums, local genealogy societies, the county libraries and larger city libraries, colleges and universities, tribal cultural committees, and any other known archives. Montana used the national form and added questions of its own to gather information pertinent to the planning process. Of particular importance in this survey was the identification by the local survey participants of their most pressing needs as well as the participants' ranking of the board's records issues and preliminary funding priorities.



Detail of an Evelyn Cameron photograph of a German-Russian wedding celebration in 1912. (Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives)

Montana's Strategic Plan

What We Propose to Do

The following report reflects the concerns and comments expressed during the strategic planning process. The problems revealed in the assessment are not new, nor have we been unaware of them. The plan that follows identifies six major issues for Montana's records. Each issue is accompanied by recommendations to address needs and strategies to accomplish the goals. Many of the strategies in this plan work to achieve more than one goal. Many outcomes will take place as a consequence of one another. The plan broadens and expands the involvement and commitment to records care and preservation. Only broad participation will ensure that Montana's records have a future.

Issue I: Cooperation is Essential to Finding Solutions to Montana's Records Needs

Montana ranks fourth in size, forty-fourth in population, and forty-sixth in per capita personal income among the fifty states. As a result, its population centers are scattered, its tax base is small, and its expertise in specific areas is limited. Montana has only seven full-time professional archivists; most of the archival activity in the state is carried on by paraprofessionals or volunteers. To meet the needs of its citizens for preservation of and access to historical records, Montana must seek solutions that encourage cooperative efforts from all records constituencies.

Recommendation

That a statewide cooperative approach—involving Montana citizens, state and local governments, Native American groups, records repositories, and the SHRAB—be created for the preservation of Montana records of enduring value. The SHRAB will spearhead efforts to ensure that repositories work together to achieve common goals.

Strategies

- ⇒ Obtain continued funding for the SHRAB so its leadership role in this cooperative approach can continue.
- ⇒ Draft and secure passage of legislation for a dedicated revenue stream to be used to manage and preserve permanent records in the political subdivisions, to pay for records services received from the state archives, and to provide grants to records agencies on a competitive basis.
- ⇒ Develop and strengthen links to the Museums Association of Montana (MAM), the Montana Library Association (MLA), the Montana Oral History Association (MOHA), the state's Information Services Division (ISD), and others.
- ⇒ Maintain the board's successful connection with the Big Sky Chapter of ARMA (Association of Records Managers and Administrators).
- ⇒ Encourage closer ties between local records custodians and the information communities.

Issue II: Inadequate Preservation and Conservation Jeopardize Montana's Historical Records

Many of our most valuable historical records are recorded and stored on media that are unstable. Paper used to create records over the past century and a half is acidic and is slowly disintegrating. Magnetic tape used in audio, video, and computer data recordings demonstrably deteriorates within a decade or two. Archives and manuscripts repositories must take the actions necessary to slow this deterioration. Modern facilities, in which records of long-term value are housed in archival containers and kept in climate-controlled environments, are essential to records preservation. Montana state government keeps its records in such a facility to protect its own—and therefore the public's—archival records.

Virtually every paper-based collection of historical records in the state is in need of some sort of preservation treatment. In some cases the records custodians, unaware of the best options, are making unwise choices for their limited conservation dollars. In other cases no money is available for prevention or treatment. One of the least expensive options is disaster preparedness planning, a practice most institutions ignore. In addition, archival electronic records, unless they have enduring value to the agencies and organizations producing them, are not being preserved at all because there are no processes in place to identify which electronic records have value or how to preserve them.

Limited funds, lack of policies, and inappropriate use of space have created a crisis in both the quantity and quality of storage for historical records. Government offices and manuscripts repositories share the problem of space and list it as their top or almost top concern.

Recommendation

Historical records facilities in Montana need improvement, specifically more space and improved environmental controls.

Strategies

- ⇒ Publicly support efforts to improve facilities or build new facilities.
- ⇒ Establish guidelines for those using commercial facilities to provide minimum acceptable storage conditions.

Recommendation

Increase preservation/conservation practices in Montana repositories.

Strategies

- ⇒ Provide instructional workshops on collections management.
- ⇒ Sponsor activities to educate records custodians in preservation concerns.
- ⇒ Through consultants, provide expert advice on the proper management of collections.
- ⇒ Establish a directory of preservation expertise.
- ⇒ Develop a list of preservation needs and priorities.
- ⇒ Encourage the development of disaster plans.
- ⇒ Develop a priority list of historical records for preservation microfilming.
- ⇒ Establish a paper conservator position at the Montana Historical Society which will also be available to assist other institutions.

Issue III: Significant Changes are Imperative to Ensure the Availability, Access, and Ease of Use of Montana's Historical Records

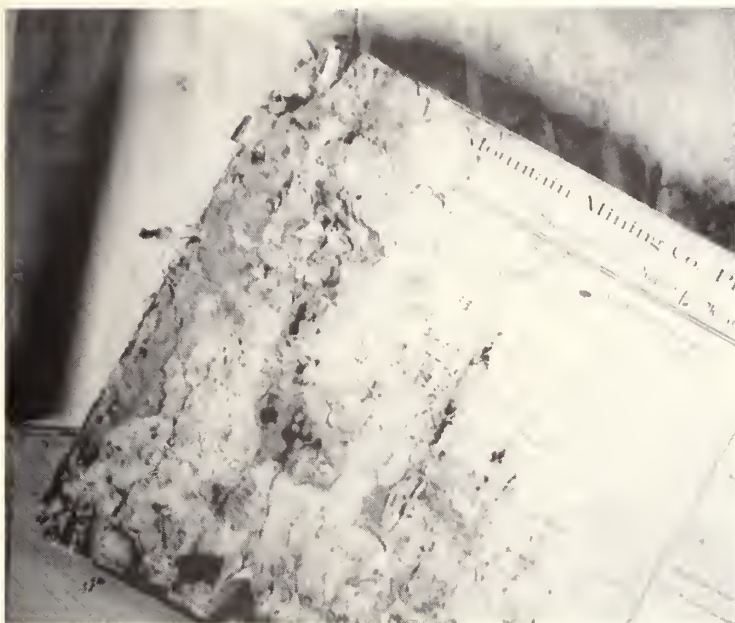
Many historical records are not readily accessible to researchers. This situation is caused by limited funds and by the absence or inadequacy of indexing, arrangement, and description of the records—or by the failure to follow standard practices for these activities. Archivaly-valuable electronic records are inaccessible because most researchers do not know where they are located or even that they exist. Few Montana repositories have yet to take advantage of the improvements computerization offers.

Recommendation

Measures need to be taken to ensure the availability, physical and intellectual access, and ease of use of Montana's historical records, including those in electronic formats.

Strategies

- ⇒ Sponsor and encourage arrangement and description training for staff of historical records repositories.
- ⇒ Encourage repositories to report holdings to appropriate databases (e.g., the Western Library Network) to improve access by researchers.
- ⇒ Encourage direct access to historical records via computers.
- ⇒ Work toward the development and passage of a GRAMA-type law for access to public records.
- ⇒ Encourage various levels of processing records to promote physical access.



Top: Mold-damaged financial volume. Mold can remain inactive for year and then come back to life when exposed to raised humidity levels.

Below: Leather-bound volumes with red rot. At this stage the leather is powdery and brownish-red in color and tends to rub off easily. Once leather has deteriorated to this stage, it is beyond treatment.

(Montana Historical Society Archives)



Issue IV: Insufficient Education and Training Impede the Preser- vation of the Historical Rec- ord in Montana

The people who currently protect and preserve Montana's records and provide access to a variety of users are a dedicated group of individuals. They often, however, lack expertise or formal training in the management and care of records. Staff in both public and private organizations are not well trained and organizations generally lack funds to pay for training, especially in organizations that rely primarily on volunteer staffs. This lack of knowledge is even more pervasive in the area of electronic records.

Lack of appropriate training contributes to a variety of problems. Records are stored in ways that lead to deterioration; records are sometimes difficult to find. Records repositories' staff need a full range of training in collections management policies, arrangement and description practices, holdings maintenance, storage and handling practices, and disaster preparedness planning. Staff in on-going organizations—especially in state agencies and local government offices—need training in the importance, identification, and care of archival records and in the basics of records management, including the inventory of records,

the development of retention schedules, the management of files, and the management of electronic records.

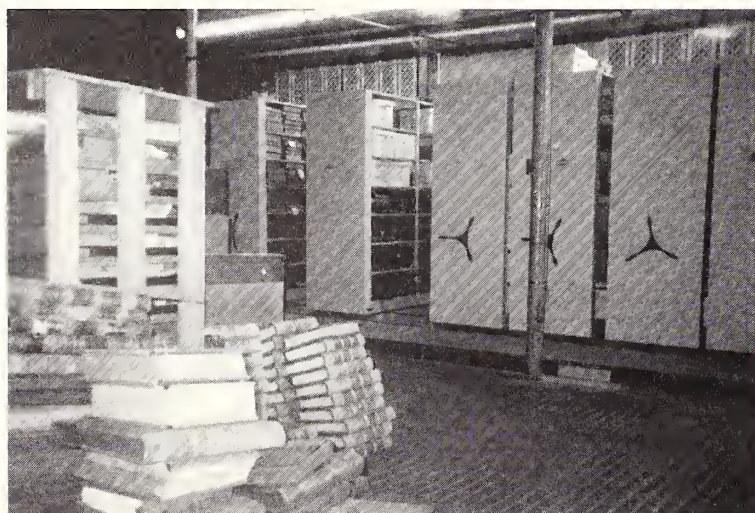
If local records repositories and offices are to take more responsibility for caring for records, they must have stronger support and guidance. They must have available training opportunities that enable them to upgrade their own records programs.

Recommendation

That a coordinated and on-going training program be developed and made available to state and local governments, local repositories, organizations, and others involved in records care.

Strategies

- ⇒ Sponsor workshops in collaboration with other state organizations, such as the Museums Association of Montana (MAM), the Montana Library Association (MLA), and the Big Sky Chapter of ARMA (Association of Records Managers and Administrators); specifically, sponsor or co-sponsor at least one annual state-wide training session.
- ⇒ Develop and distribute publications that promote the importance of historical records.
- ⇒ Sponsor technical publications to complement workshops.
- ⇒ Develop a clearinghouse and lending library for archival materials.
- ⇒ Publicize training opportunities provided by other organizations.
- ⇒ Train more trainers.



*Old and new storage methods
juxtaposed at the Butte-Silver
Bow Public Archives. On the
right is state-of-the-art move-
able shelving.
(Butte-Silver Bow Public
Archives)*

Issue V: Public and Private Organizations in Montana Give Historical Records a Low Priority

One of the greatest risks to records is a lack of support or public awareness. Public agencies and private organizations often are unaware of the value of archival records and do not view the maintenance of historical records as an important responsibility. Typically these organizations—and the general public—neither understand nor appreciate the problems associated with preserving historical records and ensuring future access to them. Because of competing demands for limited resources, these agencies and organizations also provide little, if any, financial support for historical records programs. A continued commitment is needed to preserve records over time, but unfortunately this commitment often changes along with organizational priorities. Building a supportive public constituency is a grassroots effort.

Recommendation

Strengthen the appreciation among various stakeholders of the importance of historical records.

Strategies

- ⇒ Promote awareness of this problem by conducting presentations and preparing publications for these organizations.
- ⇒ Conduct a publicity campaign to highlight issues involving historical records.
- ⇒ Build partnerships with stakeholders.
- ⇒ Take the records message to legislators and other officials.
- ⇒ Improve communications among SHRAB members and encourage communications with records stakeholders, especially special communities, such as Native Americans.
- ⇒ Encourage local repositories to reach out to local audiences, such as civic organizations and schools, by offering speakers or tours of their facilities.



Delegation of Flathead Indians to Washington, D.C., 1883.

Left: John Hill, Antoine Moiese, and Abel

Center: U.S. Indian Agent Peter Ronan and Chief Charlo.

Right: Michael Revais and Louis.

(Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives)

Issue VI: Continued and Expanded Funding for Records Programs is Critical for Montana

Traditional sources of funding for records programs, mainly through government appropriation, are unlikely to yield additional resources sufficient to respond to the needs identified in the assessment. Nonetheless, continued and expanded funding for records programs in Montana is critical. NHPRC, however, does not fund much of what this report identifies as the priority needs for the majority of Montana repositories. Few repositories in Montana

can make the claim that their records are of national importance; instead they are of local or regional importance. Most repositories are struggling to cover the basics, rather than developing innovative techniques or procedures that can be used as a model by others. What NHPRC does offer the small repositories is its regrant program.

Recommendation

To benefit the majority of Montana's archival repositories, the SHRAB should seek NHPRC regrant funds.

Strategies

- ⇒ The SHRAB will apply for a Montana Cultural Trust grant to hire a traveling archivist, and then
- ⇒ The SHRAB will apply to NHPRC for a regrant program.



*Horsepower was still the primary source of assistance to Montana farmers and ranchers when this undated photograph of binding and shocking wheat in the Big Hole area was taken, but another kind of horsepower was on its way, as indicated by the early-model automobile in which the children and a man are standing to the right of the harvest crew.
(Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives)*

Montana's Priorities For NHPRC Funding

Following are the new Montana SHRAB funding priorities.

- 1 Regrant projects**
- 2 Cooperative projects**
- 3 Preservation/conservation projects**
- 4 Access projects**
- 5 Training/education/professional development projects**
- 6 Advocacy and outreach projects.**

The SHRAB deliberately refrained from listing specific types of records as priorities. Instead, the SHRAB created broad categories that are based on the findings of the planning process and will encompass different types of specific records or media. Following are some possible projects that would fit under the categories. These are meant as examples only, not as prescriptive.

Preservation/Conservation

Possible grant projects might include:

- ⇒ cooperative preservation planning or preservation activities;
- ⇒ reformatting collections, either microfilming, imaging, or photocopying;
- ⇒ disaster preparedness, such as developing a disaster plan for an individual institution or sponsoring a workshop on disaster preparedness;
- ⇒ improving storage conditions, including shelving, boxes and other acid-free materials, environmental monitoring, integrated pest management workshops;
- ⇒ preservation planning, including workshops and assessments.

Access

Possible grant projects might include:

- ⇒ cooperative processing and/or cataloging projects;
- ⇒ creating finding aids;
- ⇒ converting finding aids to electronic format;
- ⇒ automation of an archives' cataloging system;
- ⇒ backlog processing;
- ⇒ developing a collecting policy;
- ⇒ developing and implementing a collections management policy.

Education/Training/Professional Development

Possible grant projects might include:

- ⇒ cooperative training projects;
- ⇒ policies/procedures;
- ⇒ workshops, seminars, and other presentations.

Advocacy and Outreach

Possible grant projects include:

- ⇒ cooperative outreach projects, such as developing curriculum using documents to teach or creating cooperative webpages;
- ⇒ encourage use of collections;
- ⇒ solicitation of new records collections, especially those documenting under-documented subject areas;
- ⇒ increase visibility;
- ⇒ conferences, meetings, publications, and other promotional activities;
- ⇒ initiatives to attract funding for statewide activities.

Appendix A – NHPRC Grants to Montana 1979 - 1996

1979

Montana Historical Society

to arrange, describe, and preserve the F.Jay Haynes photograph collection

1981

Montana State Historical Records Advisory Board

to conduct an historical records assessment and publish a state plan

1983

Montana Historical Society

to review and evaluate technological information in the Anaconda Copper Mining Co. records

1984

Montana Historical Society

to initiate a local public records program in the state

Montana State University

to preserve and make available the M.L. Wilson photograph collection

1988

City of Great Falls

to survey, appraise, and establish retention
schedules, and to develop a records manual

1990

Little Big Horn College

to survey the records of the Crow tribal government

1992

Little Big Horn College

to create an on-going oral history program

1994

Blackfeet Tribe

to develop a records program for the tribe

Montana State Historical Records Advisory Board

to conduct phase I of a records planning project

1996

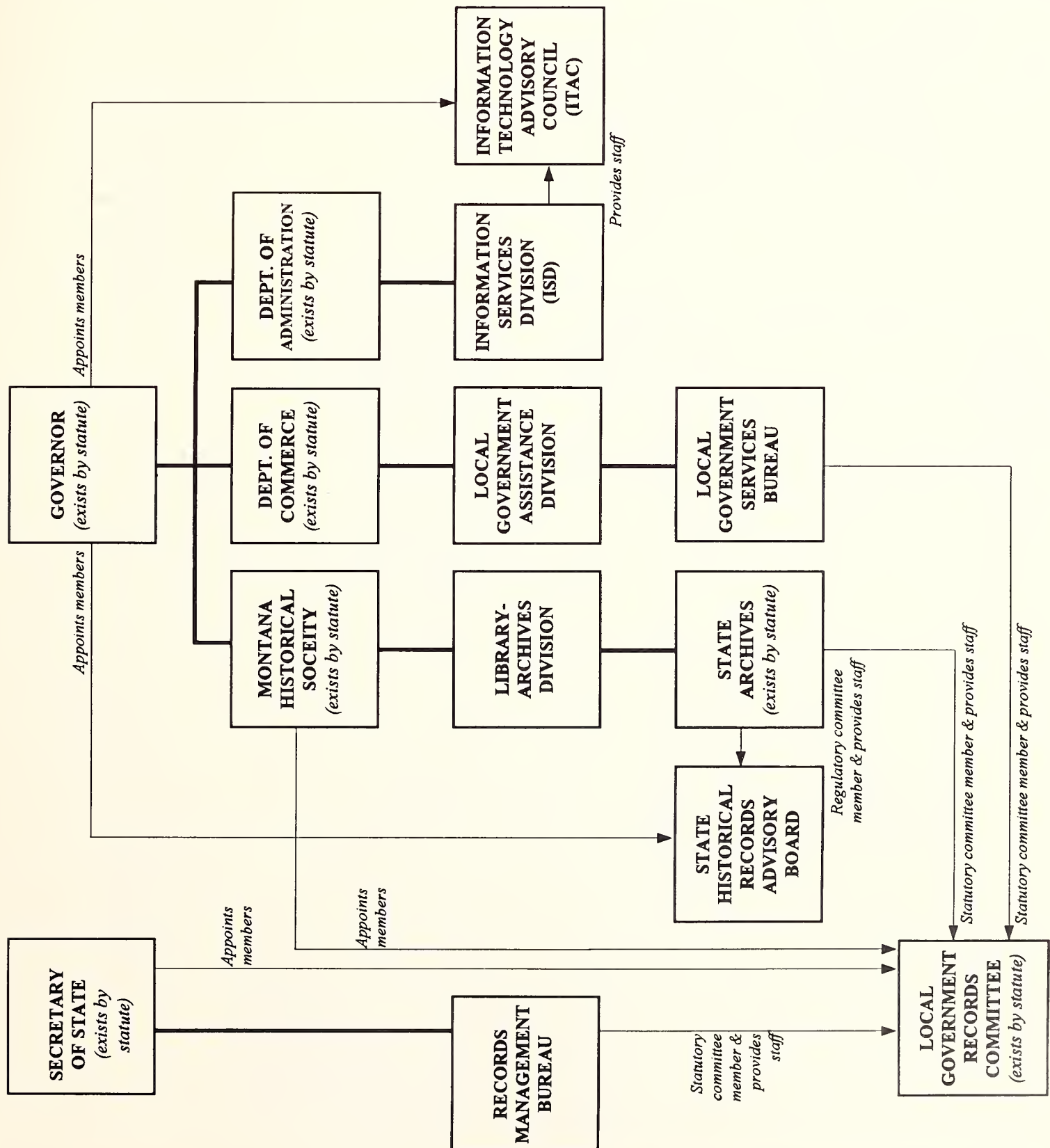
Montana State Historical Records Advisory Board

to conduct phase II of the planning project
and publish its state plan

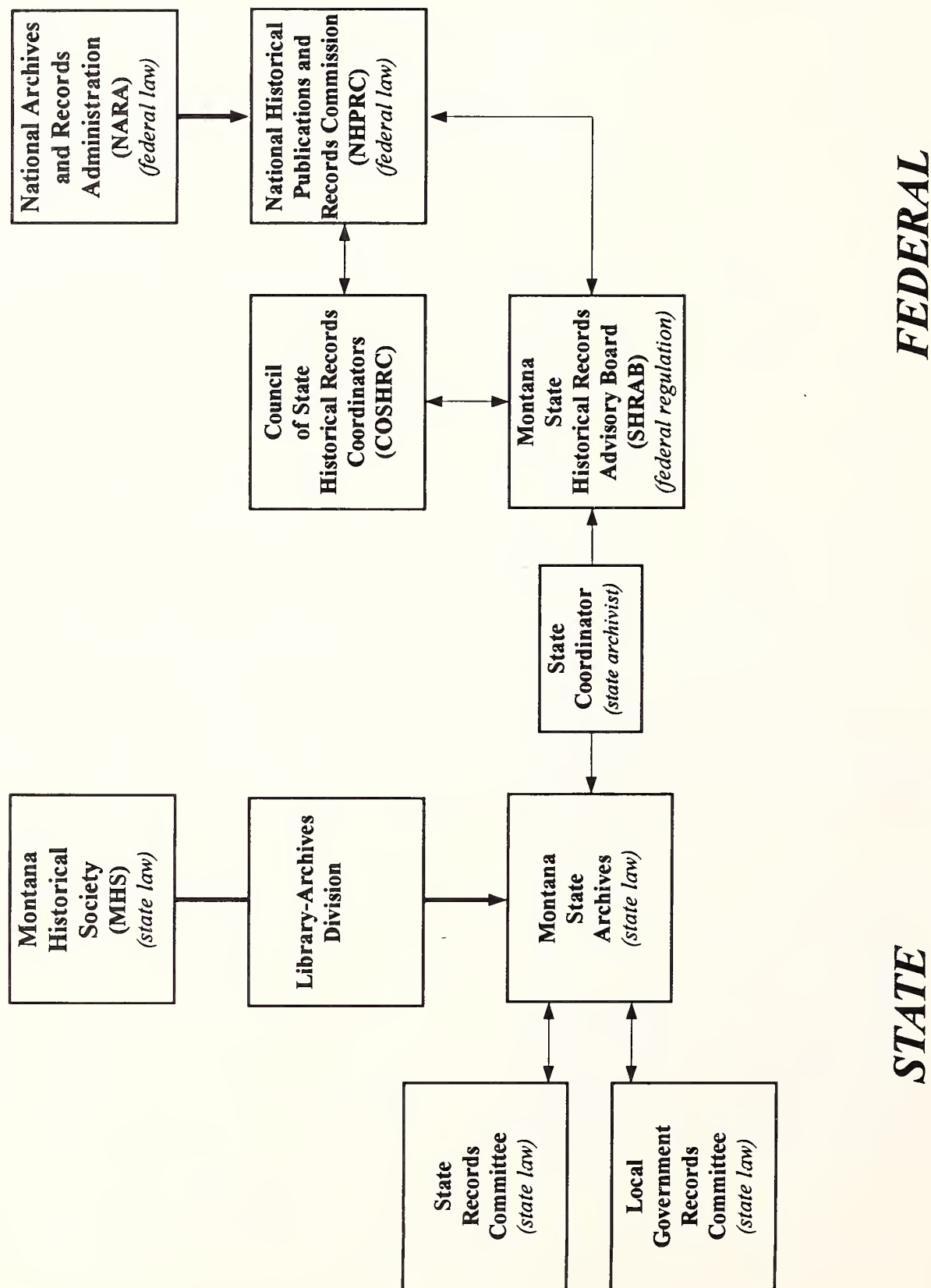


*F. Jay Haynes with stereoscopic camera at the Great Falls of
the Missouri River, Montana Territory, 1880.
(Haynes Foundation Collection
Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives)*

Appendix B – The Records Environment in Montana State Government



Appendix C – Historical Records and Archives— State and Federal Links





Montana Historical Library,
Main Room,
April 1904